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THE GREAT STAKES IN CHURCH UNITY

BY CALVIN DILL WILSON

ARE there any selfish aspects in proposals for church unity? Who would benefit most by it? Would a United Church be a party triumph? Would it exalt the ambitious? Are any leaders aiming to form a church trust? If any proposed plans came to fruition, would the power and wealth of the several churches, as they now exist, fall into the hands of men who are now the leaders of any one branch of the church? Are ecclesiastics ever ambitious? Are any ready to seize the reins of power? Are any ecclesiastical Men on Horseback abroad? Such questions are inevitable, however harsh they may seem, so long as any church party, in discussing measures for the union of the churches, insists upon its own chief tenet, or tenets, as essential to the merger.

It is time that the American people should be awakened to the issues involved, the grosser as well as the spiritual issues. Few subjects so weighty and important to us as a people are now before the public as the future of the churches in our country. This is the affair of all Americans, for it involves the moral and spiritual training of the nation. There is to be a better spiritual condition or a worse. There is to be growing enlightenment and charity or religious confusion or a spiritual tyranny.

There is a tendency to divert attention from our own religious problems to the problems of Christendom at large. The union of Christendom as a whole is another matter. There is no immediate prospect of much being done in that direction. Church union is not in the air of Christendom as a whole, but it is in the air in the United States. It is a live question here. Americans should realize that our concern at present is with our own religious

problems. We are confronted with proposals and movements for union here at home. What the Greek Church and the Oriental churches and the Roman Church abroad and the Protestant churches in other lands may do or not do does not affect us directly. Moreover, we can produce little effect upon these bodies if we would do so. But all Americans can have some influence on the religious future of our own country.

In America, among the large numbers of people who care for the existence of any church at all, there is profound and wide-spread interest in the future of the churches. The questions in regard to them that emerge are in general these: Are the churches in this land to continue to exist as distinct organizations, with common aims, with the spirit of co-operation and fellowship? Are the several churches to be blended in one great corporation? Are the Protestant churches to become one church, and to exist side by side with the Roman Catholic Church? If the several churches continue to exist as distinct bodies, are they to become more and more democratic in organization and methods? If all the churches are to be amalgamated, is this unified body to become a democracy? Is it to be foreign in pattern and allegiance or American? If the Protestant churches are to be merged, and to exist side by side with the Roman Catholic Church, is the Protestant division to be divergent in form from now existing churches? Is it to be an eclecticism? Is it to be a democracy, a republic, or a monarchy? Our fathers, when repudiating the rule of England, did not import a monarch nor create one, but they framed a government for themselves; will the church or churches of the future be less Oriental and European and more American?

Such questions are in the minds of multitudes of Americans. It seems quite probable that in the effort to find light upon them the subject of Church History will become a very live one, and will need more and more to be studied and mastered. Scientific study of it, without bias, prejudice, or the influence of any ecclesiastical school, will be needed. The American people, as a whole, should know the facts.

In the minds of many excellent people, the ideal of Christian unity means the massing of all Christians in one vast organization, under one form of church government, with one doctrinal system, and with one order of worship. By

unity they mean uniformity. There are many others who believe uniformity not only impossible but undesirable, and who hold that unity in spirit, in co-operation, and in charity is more vital and important than uniformity.

Happily, there is to-day in this country a vast deal of unity in spirit and in co-operation among the churches. There is less and less of friction, less of interference on mission fields, less multiplication of churches in communities already well-churched. There is little polemic thunder heard from pulpits. To a large extent a Truce of God has been declared between the churches. Movements are under way to unite the churches that belong to the same families, as the Baptists in one, the Lutherans in one, the Methodists in one. There is the great Federation of Churches, whose aim is not uniformity, but co-operation. There are also movements planned and in progress for union of all Protestant churches in one vast church.

There are sincere and earnest people who have the profound conviction that the whole problem of the relations of the several churches is to be successfully solved by absorbing all the other churches into their own church. It is quite possible there are individuals in each church that are of this opinion.

The signs of the times indicate that there will be, in the near future, more and more agitation and discussion, rather than less, on the relations of the several churches to one another. It will be wise, therefore, for the American people, whose moral and spiritual interests are involved, to watch these movements with attention and understanding. It will be advisable for us to look at this matter with keen scrutiny and to realize that there are possibilities of making matters worse instead of better.

In contemplating even the possibility of so great a change among us as the reorganization of the Christian forces of the Republic, or the Protestant forces at least, we as a people should turn upon all suggestions or movements of this kind all the light we can obtain. We should look at them from every point of view, get all the information obtainable, and reason calmly on the facts. We should look at this situation with the same dispassionateness, using our knowledge of human nature and its strong and weak points, as we would upon a question of business or politics.

We should even strip this movement of religious terms

and look at it as one for massing forces and concentrating wealth. We should even turn upon plans and movements for church unity the fierce light of suspicion, questioning the possible motives of the leaders concerned. When a crime is committed, officers of the law first endeavor to find out who profits by the deed. When even so good a work as the advancement of Christian unity is concerned, it is necessary for the American people to ask, Are there any grosser aspects in these plans?

It may seem needlessly cruel even to appear to arraign the motives of any or all leaders in movements for Christian unity. We do not arraign them. We suggest that the American people should not take for granted that all motives are necessarily sincere and pure. We as a people have not hesitated to investigate the motives and deeds of all sorts of men in politics and in finance. We are especially inclined just now to watch all combinations of power. It is suggested that it is wise to understand what is involved in all proposed movements for church unity.

We should realize clearly that the movements of the present toward church unity, if successful, would mean the centering of vast power and control of great wealth in the hands of church leaders of the dominant party. We do not question the integrity and sincerity of the leaders of the several churches. But we summon history to testify that ecclesiastics are not incapable of being influenced by love of power. We suggest that it would be a great strain on the judgment and character of any man, or any set of men, if the power and wealth of the combined Protestant churches of the United States were placed in their hands.

To bring the significance of this subject fairly before the reader, let us study briefly certain religious statistics provided by the Federal Government.

There are in the continental United States more than thirty-six millions of church members. There are among these, twelve millions of Roman Catholics. There are twenty-four millions of Protestants. These are actual members of the churches; the following of all the churches is, of course, very much larger, probably double. Assume that any one of the existing Protestant churches were able to persuade all the others to be absorbed by it, it is plain that the vast numbers then to be included in that body would mean an enormous increment of power.

There are now 5,749,838 Methodists in America. Assume that all other Protestants here became Methodists. The Methodists would rise from five millions and a fraction to twenty-four millions. If all became Baptists, the Baptists would rise from 5,662,234 to twenty-four millions. If all became Lutherans, the Lutherans would become from 2,112,494 an army of twenty-four millions. If all became Presbyterians, the Presbyterians would be increased from 1,830,555 to twenty-four millions. If all became Protestant Episcopalians, the Episcopalians would rise from 956,930 to twenty-four millions.

We do not say all these churches are seeking to absorb all others, but certain of the existing churches who insist on their special tenets as terms of union are actually seeking such absorption. Are all leaders of such churches as are prominent in movements for church unity, and who emphasize some one or more of their peculiar tenets as essential for union, blind to the facts as presented by these figures? Does the dream that if their plans are carried out they and their party will be exalted and victorious never enter their minds? If we were treating of worldlings, we would agree without hesitation that any set of men proposing to absorb into their own particular body all these other vast numbers were playing an ambitious game for a great stake. In this great matter the same cold scrutiny of motives should be employed as in any other. The history of the world does not justify the American people in taking for granted that any human beings are above temptation.

Look at this subject from the point of view of the property, the wealth, involved. The total number of organizations of all the churches in the United States is 186,132.

The total value of the property of all the churches is \$1,257,575,867.

The value of the property of the Roman Catholic Church in this country is \$292,638,787.

Omitting the Roman Catholics from the estimates, if all the Protestants in the United States were to become Methodists, the Methodist property values would rise from \$229,150,996 to almost a billion. The Baptist property would rise from \$139,842,656 to almost a billion. The Lutheran property would rise from \$74,826,389 to almost a billion. The Presbyterian property would rise from \$150,189,446 to

almost a billion. The Protestant Episcopal property would rise from \$125,040,498 to almost a billion.

Think of the vast additions to the forces of the Sunday-schools, if any other organization absorbed the 4,472,930 in Methodist Sunday-schools, the 2,808,914 children in Baptist Sunday-schools, the 1,511,175 in Presbyterian Sunday-schools, the 782,786 in Lutheran Sunday-schools, and the 464,351 children in Protestant Episcopal Sunday-schools, not to mention the many millions of children in the Sunday-schools of all the other churches.

When one considers these great numbers in membership and in the Sunday-schools and this vast wealth, one is prepared to be shocked by the self-assertion, self-satisfaction and egotism of any one church that could dream, if any would dream, of offering itself as authorized to absorb all the others. On the face of it, any one church, if there were such, that could entertain for a moment the idea of solving the problems of church unity by such a piece of insolence would be unworthy, by lack of respect for the people, the work, and the rights of other churches, to be considered.

The American people, in considering the future possible changes in their spiritual and moral organizations, should keep clearly before them these facts and beware of any proposals from any quarter that might suggest the monstrous egotism of absorption of all bodies by any one body.

When we consider how dubious are many so-called historic claims, how feeble a reed history is at best to lean upon, how hopelessly divided scholars are upon the problems at issue between various churches, and when we consider that it is under the guise of these debatable claims and questionable proofs any must appear who may offer to absorb all the millions of money and members of the others, one is almost prepared to call any such proposals that might be put forth ecclesiastical highwaymanry. Any who might, under any guise, propose to thus appropriate the results of other men's labors, seek as spoil other men's wealth, are fit objects of suspicion, and the selfishness of their plans should be exposed in the market-place.

Again. Is the Kaiser of Germany an impartial witness as to the "divine right of kings"? There is nothing more natural than that he should believe in this right. It is natural he should wish to strengthen his position in his own mind and in the judgment of as many men as he can

influence, that, contrary to the general opinion in this era of democracy, he reigns by the will of God. Everybody knows that reason, history, philosophy would fail to shake him in his opinion. Are ecclesiastics, whose positions and powers are vitally related to certain theories of church government, more dispassionate in judgment than the Kaiser? It is not to be anticipated that any leader of any church who is exalted to high place by any theory that accredits his exaltation to divine authority, or to Christ as Founder of the Church, can be able to judge clearly whether or no his theory is actually tenable. We can safely discount all such as prejudiced witnesses.

The American people, who are to take part in forming the church organizations of the future in this country, should keenly scrutinize the motives of any or all who put forward plans for church unity that exalt their advocates. They should ask themselves the question, Are these men claiming a divine right for themselves? Is the point at issue, after all, important to them chiefly because it secures to them a high seat, a superior authority? Would the granting of their claim redound to their glory? Would it put and keep power in their hands? Then their motives are at least open to investigation. We must discount the king pleading for his own divine right.

In instances in which the theory of any church distinctly exalts not only its leaders, but itself, giving it exclusive claims which unchurch all other churches, a large element of selfishness may be suspected. There is an undeniable satisfaction in the minds of many in thinking themselves possessed of something or anything that renders them really or apparently superior to other people. This feeling exists to some extent in the churches. Some rejoice not in "the common faith," but in that which separates them from other Christians, and, in their own view, exalts them.

The American people should insist on democracy in the churches. They should suspect the presence of overgrown selfishness in any or all ecclesiastical bodies that demean their sister organizations to glorify themselves.

The terms in which special claims are put forward as being more historic, Scriptural, primitive, apostolic, true, inclusive, Catholic, should be subjected to thorough analysis. No weight should be allowed to any claim as such. We should not be awed by the terms used. The severest tests

should be applied. Is the historic claim sound history? Is the Scriptural claim based on enlightened exegesis? Is their apostolicity apostolic in fact or only in name? What is Catholic and what is not Catholic? Are claims based on dubious texts? On questionable traditions? On fragmentary and equivocal passages in the Fathers?

What do secular historians, who write in the scientific spirit, have to say? Do they differ radically in interpretation of facts and in regard to supposed facts themselves from partisan ecclesiastics and their works?

How much deference is due to custom and usage as such? Are we, and future generations, to be bound wholly by what has been? Are we to have the best, according to the enlightenment of a growing world, or are we to carry useless baggage simply because other generations have carried it?

Without mastering such questions and looking clearly into them, we may be in peril of being over-much influenced by words and terms. We should ascertain just what the words and terms mean and what they contain of fact.

Any churches which in their approach to others, to convince, proselyte, or absorb, aim to win by flattering proffers of superior social prestige or wealth or other worldly advantage should be questioned as to motives. Such pleas, if ever made, should repel rather than attract in religious affairs. It should suggest weakness in a cause involving principle and conviction to claim for it social or worldly advantages. We lament the misconception of the Chinaman who, according to the story, asked the missionary who strove to win him to Christianity, "Is there more rice in it?" Any groups of church people who might plead, boastfully, with motives of winning others to their party, "We represent the best people, most social prestige, wealth," should be suspected.

The plans of any groups for church unity should be judged by the present conduct of such advocates. Are these advocates now consistently courteous in their relations with other churches? Do any of these advocates now in practice, while proclaiming theories for a larger unity, cajole and coax individuals and groups from other churches into their own body as it is? Do they practise absorption when they can? Are they now tolerant and charitable in their attitude toward other Christians? Or do they proclaim one thing and practise another? If they now actually spend much energy

in proselyting from other churches, if they delight in weakening other churches for their own gain, we may rightly judge that behind their theories of a larger unity there really exist the motive and intent to absorb other bodies. Behind the barricades and fortifications flying the flag of Truth we may suspect selfishness.

We must remember that, in case the numerous Protestant churches were to come to a point where they were preparing to amalgamate, in the final arrangements there would be danger that some one party would actually carry its main point. Any one of the several churches could give up many other points and yet retain one or two points which are, after all, their chief ones. We may illustrate by secular governments. Assume that a monarchy and a democracy were considering an agreement as to form of government. A monarchy could give up many points to democracy; it could yield to urgency for a constitutional monarchy, to a merely nominal kingship, call the king a figure-head, perhaps, yet so long as there was a king at all the monarchy would win in the agreement.

It is just so in the disputes among the churches. The party that in an amalgamation should carry its main point of difference would actually triumph. It should be clearly recognized, and never lost sight of in the confusion of discussion, that, as in the above illustration, democracy or monarchy wins if it carries its main point.

The event in regard to the churches would be that, after all the warfare and debate and supposed give-and-take, the result of the amalgamation would be a vast church having as its predominant characteristic the chief characteristic of the party that had seemed to yield much, but had, after all, gained all. This is the actual peril. No array of words, no change of terms, no apparent concessions, should be allowed to keep this fact from being clearly seen.

We may illustrate by the Church of Rome, which is not under discussion in this paper. The Roman Church has arranged with certain groups in the Greek Church that by acknowledging the Pope they could enter the Roman fold while retaining their own liturgy and in fact everything else peculiar to them, except relations to the Greek Patriarch. In this concession to the Uniates, while Rome grants much, it still wins, for acknowledgment of the Pope is its cardinal principle.

In the plans for church unity there are several of the churches that make the condition of general acceptance of their chief tenet. They begin their plans for unity by stating as acceptable to them the principles on which all orthodox churches are agreed, as the Bible, the Apostles' Creed, and then offer their own peculiar tenet. As Dr. Ward puts it, "They begin with infinity and end in a squirrel hole."

Assume for a moment that the other millions of Christians in this country agree to enter "the squirrel hole," and imagine the triumph of that church party that has gained its point. Imagine the scenes that would follow. Imagine the twenty millions or more of the Protestant Christians of America, people who have been building and supporting churches and sending the Gospel throughout the earth, hosts of the representatives of all that is best in the nation and its history, coming to the feet of the triumphant party, to be readmitted into the Church of Christ by duplicated rites, as if they had never before been fittingly received into the Body of Christ, and thousands of pastors, who are now in the front of the battle, being reordained as if they before had never been real ministers of Christ. Picture it to yourself. Yet that is what would occur if certain of the parties now advocating church unity carried their chief point. Nothing more striking could be fancied than this unless it were the return of all the Protestants of the world to the Roman Catholic Church, or the United States accepting the rule of George the Fifth.

When we consider that such an issue, while improbable, is just what would be if certain claims were allowed, we must realize what this would mean to ambitious men, if any such existed in the victorious party. It is difficult to entirely separate the idea of ambition from any men of any party whose tenets, now insisted on, would lead to such an issue. It is difficult to believe that the significance of any possible victory on their side has not dawned on them. It is difficult to believe they do not see for themselves one of the most striking victories in the history of the Christian Church.

We can conceive a very different situation, one in which all churches throw aside all disputed points and differences, and come together only upon the few cardinal principles of Christianity—a situation in which all would have conceded

equally, one in which there would be the triumph of no party.

But so long as any party insists on its own characteristic tenet, union, if it comes, means the triumph of that tenet, victory of that party. The rest follows inevitably.

In case any one party should succeed by winning over all the other millions to its chief tenet, and all our Protestant Christians were merged in one vast church, with that peculiar tenet triumphant, could there arise in this land a spiritual tyranny?

It is not probable and yet it is possible. Spiritual tyrannies have been and may be again. Spiritual tyrannies generally have arisen only where there has been concentration of power, or a large portion of it, in any one church, usually an established church. The forming of one vast Protestant church in America would make possible a spiritual tyranny such as could not exist under our present order with numerous independent churches. One church of twenty-four millions, with its following, could, if not guarded against, exercise power for evil such as the several bodies to-day could not if they would.

It is matter of common knowledge that the Greek Church in Russia has exercised tyrannical power for the suppression of religious freedom. Protestant churches have been denied rights within the Russian Empire.

In England, the Establishment has striven many times to suppress the dissenting bodies. The Non-conformists have been persecuted. They have been taxed to support a form of religion contrary to their consciences. They have suffered socially and politically. They have been discriminated against in the chief universities. Only within a very recent period have Non-conformist ministers been allowed to graduate at Cambridge, or to receive honorary degrees. Oxford still denies Non-conformists these rights. In this country we would consider it spiritual tyranny for any church to discriminate in this manner between classes of men.

These statements suggest that a spiritual tyranny is among the possibilities, since such now exists in other lands.

We find in our own republic some clergymen who have little regard for the rights of other pastors. They claim the name Church for themselves alone. They deny the validity of the ordination of all pastors outside their own

organization. They claim a whole parish for themselves, as if there were no other churches or pastors in their bounds. They invade the congregations of other ministers with proselyting literature and coax members from other flocks into their own. If such an attitude is possible in a free nation, where all churches are on an equal footing, is it not possible that such men, if their party became predominant, would become more and more intolerant?

It is vital to keep in mind that even good men, holy men, are capable of self-deception. America cannot afford to cast in its lot, its spiritual future, with misinterpreted and perverted history, with alien prejudices, with vanities and egotisms in ecclesiastical affairs.

It is useless to urge that this or that form of church government has obtained in most of the churches through many ages. Our fathers did not consider that the vast majority of men have always lived under monarchies. They decided that monarchy is not the best form of government and they founded a republic.

It is clearly to be kept before us that the chief differences among the churches are not doctrinal, but are governmental. The general truths of Christianity are common to all. It is in forms of government the churches most radically differ. In secular governments there are three general forms—the monarchical, the republican, and the democratic. Broadly, these forms are paralleled in the churches, some of which are monarchic, others are republican, and still others are democratic.

In the consideration of any or all movements toward the union of the churches in our land, we cannot too seriously realize that there are at issue great stakes.

CALVIN DILL WILSON.